

News & Reports

Pandemic puppy phenomenon is a reality

By Adele Waters

EVIDENCE has now confirmed what many people suspected: the Covid-19 pandemic has driven a demand for puppies.

Early findings from a study being funded by the Animal Welfare Foundation and conducted by researchers at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) confirm several factors that have driven the desire for puppies, including a 'need for something happy to focus on' during lockdown restrictions, a need to improve mental health, as well as a reason to increase exercise levels.

Presenting their findings at the Webinar Vet's Virtual Congress 2021 (27 February), the researchers said demand has increased prices for puppies by as much as 62 per cent. But they also predict the uptick in puppy buying will be associated with welfare harm and that there will be a wave of relinquishments when lockdown ends.

The RVC research team surveyed more than 6500 adults in the UK who purchased a puppy under 16 weeks old during the pandemic (March to December 2020) and compared their motivations and behaviours around their decision to get a dog with owners who acquired a dog during the same period in 2019.

They found the pandemic influenced the purchase of two out of every five puppies bought.

They also found differences in the profile of new dog owners – while most had considered buying a puppy before lockdown, almost one in 10 had not even considered it. In general these new owners are a less experienced dog handling cohort, more likely to have got their prepurchase information from friends and family and less likely have asked a vet professional (this could be explained by reduced access).

Many puppies were not viewed

before purchase – there was an increase in owners relying on video clips to choose (up from 6.6 per cent to 28.3 per cent) – and one in four puppies were bought without the owner seeing the mother, against well established advice. New owners were also less likely to ensure their puppy had undergone recommended health checks.

Rowena Packer, a lecturer in companion animal behaviour and welfare science, who is leading the study, told the conference: 'Last year was not a normal year for puppy buying. It's not just that there was more of it, it was just done differently. Some changes were direct consequences of the restrictions placed upon the public, but many of those changes are concerning from an animal welfare perspective.'

She said many new dog owners will need a lot of support to understand normal dog behaviour and to ensure their households are safe. And while the health of these dogs is not necessarily a concern in the short term, she is concerned about the volume of health problems stacking up over time.

'It's a worry that health did appear to be a lower priority for pandemic puppy buyers – so [they were] not looking for breeders that conducted health tests as much or asking those breeders for results of any health tests.'

'Many inherited diseases might not manifest until dogs are a couple of years old so there is a real need for increased vigilance from owners for potential emerging health problems and making sure owners are aware of clinical signs of disease that might be



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prevalent in the breed or crossbreed they own.

'We risk a wave of relinquishment as restrictions are relaxed as people are inevitably called back to offices which may or may not be dog-friendly...Right now, behaviour training to prepare some of these puppies for the really dramatic lifestyle changes they will face during 2021 is really key to try to keep, where possible, those puppies at home, but also to identify those dogs that would be better off being relinquished.'

The RVC study found that prices for puppies rose from an average of £955.43 per puppy to £1549.71, with a big variation across breeds. In addition, the proportion of new owners paying a deposit to secure a puppy almost doubled in one year, from 8.5 per cent to 16 per cent, perhaps driven by fears of a puppy shortage.

The conference heard that the price of pet animals in general has risen during the pandemic, with some vets reporting price inflation of around 120 per cent. Examples of high prices shared were: French bulldog, pug and trendy crossbreed breeding bitches selling for up to £15,000; dachshunds at £3000–£4000 each; collie puppies for £2600 each; non-pedigree kittens selling for £1000 each and pedigree kittens for £2000; and pet rabbits selling at £75 each. ●